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ABSTRACT

For some time now, classroom teachers have encouraged quiet manners and docile servitude of children who attend school. There is evidence to support the notion that this type of environment is not necessarily the best for maximizing the learning potential of all children. A variety of research efforts indicate that American black children and children who reside in what are commonly called Third World countries need an active environment for the most successful transfer and acquisition of knowledge. It seems to be true that our educating institutions have developed a system of teaching and learning tuned precisely to the nature and needs of white children. It also appears that certain upper income blacks--through direct interaction with the white subcultural habits, child rearing practices, values, motives, and life styles in general--are equally successful in "school learning" as whites. Conformity to the white cognitive model, however, should not constitute the whole of what we should be striving for in our schools. Most importantly, child development professionals and related practitioners, by supporting the low motor model, instill fear in the hearts and minds of black mothers who would otherwise be interacting openly and freely with their babies natural behavior. Black children need all the developmental freedom they can muster. (Author/JM)

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NEONATAL PRECOCITY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

A paper presented at the annual conference of The Association for the Study of AfroAmerican Life and History.

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October 25,1974

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NEONATAL PRECOCITY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

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August, 1974

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For some time now, classroom teachers have encouraged quiet manners and docile servitude of children who attend school. There is evidence to support the notion that this type of environment is not necessarily the best for maximizing the learning potential of all children. A variety at research efforts indicate that American Black children and children who reside in what are commonly called Third World countries need an active environment for the most successful transfer and acquisition of knowledge.

In America, it appears to be mostly true among low income families who are not preoccupied with striving for a middle class existence--but merely sharpening their skills for survival. It is children from these families who seem most resistive to the classroom demands for quietude. Could it be that they feel more natural in their behaviors because their parents have not oppressed them into a false conformity?

Experienced teachers are well aware that Black children entering school for the first time do so with excitement and enthusiasm. The school as an institution, imposes a heavy solemness which serves to crush the creativity of children who are unwilling to withhold their bursts of energy until given permission to do so. Active Black children cannot be creative with freedom to be open and active if they are required to channel this energy through the larger side of what appears to be a cornucopia, only to be squeezed out the narrow end in a puny trickle.

The brainwashing effect of white society (who really ultimately controls our schools), and sterile schools, unwelcoming adults and peers, help to drastically diminish self worth by reenforcing a punitive approach to the child's motor excitement. The problem begins at birth and continues through the early years of growth as Black mothers are encouraged to reject

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their child's motor achievements. They are made fearful that any positive interaction with their child's precocity might lead to poor integration into the single track school system of white low motor expectations.

I believe that many children are unable to fully conform to school rules which for them are unrealistic, and as a result their energy is released in an atmosphere of hostile, punitive backlash. I am suggesting that initially, these children's use of energy in this way is not intended to be disruptive or chaotic--but strategic to their style of learning. The interaction between their release of motor energy, and the school's common reaction to it, inadvertently compels a miniature battleground.

Schools need to be uncrowded, open and airy with a great deal of natural light, plenty of private space for teachers and learners, and personnel=- from the custodian to the principal--who are knowledgeable about the nature and needs of culturally different children.

These suggestions are reasonable and practical. There are individual teachers and administrators scattered about the country who are aware of this phenomenon but are trapped in a system where there are too few who think as they do, and they themselves are too busy trying to make things work in schools where they happen to be.

It is not unreasonable to propose that research and model classrooms should exist about the country where special nonpunitive environments are created as centers of learning for children who require more free space and movement than what schools normally allow.

For the wrong reasons, something like this has been tried in the past. In the mid 1950's the New York City educational system was becoming well known for its "600" schools. They were designed primarily for acting out children, but they were also assigned chronic truants (who probably stayed away from school because of restrictive classrooms and would have been "acting out" if in school), Black children who were skillfully gotten rid of by

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white schools to which they were bussed, and those abandoned to unwelcoming friends, neighbors and relatives. In these schools, cognition and systematic academic study was given extremely low priority.

For another example, the San Francisco school system set up a three tier residential center which admitted specially referred children on the basis of their school behavior. Tier one was the entry level for the most hostile, with tier two and three being progressively closer to acceptable behavior. Once the pupil reached tier three, and could conform to school rules for a reasonable period of time, he was allowed to return to a regular school classroom. It was assumed that no one really wanted to be on tier one--and had the strongest desire to work toward tier three for the privilege of returning to their home school which got them into trouble in the first place. There school was not considering changing itself, instead, children were sent off to the three tier factory so that they could be changed.

It would be difficult to assess how much the schools' constant home contact over the child's behavior actually dipped into, and negatively influenced, the parents relationship with their preschoolers growing up at home.

Because children are powerless, and seldom listened to in our society, many decide to check their motor responses and curtail their risking behavior. Again, we may never fully know the devastating consequences of such restrictions. But we do know that of the many sequestered children who are quelled during the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade, quite a large percentage of them give us another chance as they enter junior high school. Again, experienced teachers will support the report that 7th graders have greater motor actions than at any other time after the 6th grade. The summer between the change of schools seem to revive the spirit of many black children. Some may call them disruptive children and prescribe medication for the more active ones. It is either medication, "problem" classes where cognitive expectations are low, or into the streets where they are tacitly ignored.

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Educators are so convinced that middle class low motor conformity is the only acceptable school behavior that the notion is hardly questioned. Those of us who have had little or no trouble in dampening our motor actions and have become very successful in middle class oriented society seem to be the greatest supporters of sterile classrooms where children are required to remain dormant.

A casual observation of how successful Black athletes are, in far greater numbers than their percentage of the population would logically dictate, could reveal some interesting possibilities. Basketball and to a lesser degree football, require great cognition, precisely at the height of motor expenditure. The Black athlete is especially known for his/her split second decisions while running at top speed through the defense. More formal research gives us greater insights into these fascinating areas of interest.

The early research of Geber in Africa during the middle 50's became a classic report in the child development field. Her report suggested that African infants were more advanced developmentally than western European children during the first year after birth. To support Geber's assertions, Brazelton, Koslowski and Tronick in 1971, Ainsworth in 1967, Goldberg in 1971, and Korner in 1970 reported that racial differences in growth and development can be found as early as the neonatal period.

This research also suggested that infants in different cultural groups exhibited differentiated behavior at birth which could very well carry over into later growth years. It also seems true that differentiated infant development will call forth different environments for encouraging maximum growth in the child's future years. Piaget has stated that early years of infancy are the most crucial in our lives and that during that period, the affective and cognitive areas of growth are inseparable. In other words, any stress upon the child's affective state will directly influence the cognitive

development.

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In Brazelton's studies, a comparison was made between infants born to urban Zambian mothers and those born to an equal number of white American mothers. Dr. Brazelton, using a performance scale designed a well defined system of inquiry to support the notion of cultural difference in neonatal development.

> Ten Zambian and ten American infants were seen on days one, five and ten after birth. All mothers were reported to have normal pregnancies terminated at 40 weeks...[2]

The basic instrument for testing was the Brazelton Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale. It is designed to assess reflective and motor behavior and the general physical condition of the newborn child.

It is important to note here that the Zambian mothers had had several pregnancies close upon one another in 12-13 month intervals.

Urbanization has created shanty towns in many African cities causing a breakdown in traditional practices usually found in supportive tribal communities. For many African mothers, life means low protein intake because protein is so expensive, increased infections and the abandonment of natural birth control practices which allows for the recovery of the uterus in the postnatal period between pregnancies.

As expected, the Zambian infants at birth were observed to be lower in weight and length than the white infants and were generally less healthy.

The two groups of infants were compared each day. On the day one examination, there were six items on which the two groups of infants were significantly different. The Zambian infants scored lower on following with eyes, motor activity, tempo at height, irritability, rapidity of buildup and on alertness.

By day ten, affective areas of the mother-child relationship had created greater advances in the Zambian infants than in the American infants.

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Zambian babies were more attentive and more sensitive to social stimuli.

Despite the unhealthy circumstances under which the African infants were born, within a very short time they surpassed the white infants in cuddliness, reactivity to stimulation, alertness, social interest and consolability. The African mothers' child rearing procedures created an active, energetic set of experiences for their babies. They went about caring for them as if there was not the least doubt that their infants would develop quickly. African mothers provided a high contact loving environment which was seemingly tuned to the infant's genetic ableness.

Compared to the Zambian mothers, the white mothers had less handling and feeding contact with their infants. White infants and mothers also seemed to follow a pattern of expectation and compatibility even though the early learning environment was very different from their African counterparts.

From these observations it is clear that development in infancy is influenced by inherited determinants which seem to be related to cultural procedures and social interactions.

It is also clear that Black mothers in America should be encouraged to play with their babies and share in the enjoyment of an active, touching, exciting period of child rearing. They need to be encouraged to interact with their infant's motor excitement and support their naturally inherited genetic capabilities. The mother's reciprocity is vital to a sustained growth environment for their baby because of genetic and cultural expectations. The infants' rapid buildup in the first week of life can be expected to diminish if Black parents are encouraged to adopt the low motor expectation model fostered by school authorities.

The research of Brazelton and others suggest that we are too preoccupied with stifling creative effort and reducing the imagination and excitement of natural motor development in Black children in our efforts to bring their personalities into compliance with the dominant white subculture.

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Zambian mothers whose nutrition and general living conditions were far behind those of whites gave birth to infants who were brought into normalcy by a warm and loving interaction between mother and child. It is also true that at birth, Black infants in our country surpass white infants in all areas of development when their mothers have normal doses of prenatal care.

Educators often point to the lack of tinker toys in the home of low income Black families. Several early childhood projects were funded to get playthings into the hands of Black mothers so as to increase their positive influence over their children. Little thought was given to the fact that the tinker toy concept dictates that children are expected to sit in the crib or thereabouts and play quietly with their toys until their favorite T.V. program comes on. Without these toys, of course, mother and child touch, exchange various communications and learn from one another.

It is my constant fear that the teacher's frequent communications with the mother of a 5th grader, reporting what schools call hyperactivity, just might create a state of frustration which results in a punitive home atmosphere for her two year old.

At times, this frustration leads to a parent's consent to have her 5th grader given daily medication to reduce motor activity, having been convinced or terrorized by school authorities that it is in the best interest of the child. We are all aware that when institutions tell us that something is in our best interest, it is obvious whose best interest is really being served.

In California the number of children classified as hyperactive reached 25% this year. This group, numbering approximately 2 million (in the U.S.), are taking tranquilizers, amphetamines and Ritalin--the latter being a behavior-modifying drug. Even though the effects are not clearly known, nor the damage of drug buildup over a period of years, children are prescribed daily doses for several years. The only positively known fact about this

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practice is that such treatment usually makes children less active and more quiet.

In summation, it seems to be true that our educating institutions have developed a system of teaching and learning tuned precisely to the nature and needs of white children.

It also appears that certain upper income blacks-through direct interaction with the white subcultural habits, child rearing practices, values, motives, and life styles in general-are equally successful in "school learning" as whites. Conformity to the white cognitive model, however, should not constitute the whole of what we should be striving for in our schools.

Most importantly, child development professionals and related practioners, by supporting the low motor model, instill fear in the hearts and minds of Black mothers who would otherwise be interacting openly and freely with their babies' natural behavior. These mothers need encouragement and support in initiating and sustaining an active, thoughtful environment of unrestricted warm acceptance.

Black children who find themselves too often among unwelcoming and uncaring adults and hostile institutions need all the developmental freedom they can muster to build muscle necessary for encountering the very white society in which we all live.